

From our water correspondent

Our water correspondent is Kate Fogelberg (kfogelberg@waterfor-people.org) Water For People-Peru.

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Felix Ureña blushes when I call him 'inge', short for *ingeniero* in Spanish. In Bolivia, people often just refer to professionals by their training as a form of respect. The 'pre-inge' Felix had heard on the radio about a toilet that didn't need water and provided fertilizer. Living in water-stressed District 9 of peri-urban Cochabamba, Bolivia, where he often spent up to seven times more on his 'potable' water than his fellow Cochabambinos with household water connections, the small business owner was eager to learn more about a toilet that wouldn't cost him money each time he flushed.

Understanding what your consumer wants and why is as applicable to toilets as it is to automobiles

He went to an informational session and agreed to co-finance a composting toilet at his home – for his own family to use and to show others how the technology worked. Felix put in five times more than he received as a small subsidy and modified his toilet with a 'steering wheel' device he dreamed up, embracing his inner *ingeniero*. Composting toilets need to have the drying faeces mixed so that composting occurs evenly throughout the chamber, but many people do not like the standard large stick method of

stirring their faeces. With his new invention, all Felix has to do is 'drive' a couple of times of week and he's golden.

Felix is convinced that his neighbours in rapidly growing District 9 would be willing to invest in a toilet similar to his – primarily because of its water-conserving properties, but also because of the possibilities for urban agriculture. That conviction has him expanding his current business as a successful shopkeeper to include sanitation products and services to thousands of people living in peri-urban Cochabamba. You can bet he won't be selling his wares with messages of health, as many in the sector did and still do, but rather for the reasons that motivate his neighbours. Marketing Rule 1: 'Understand what your consumer wants and why', is as applicable to toilets as it is to automobiles, and Felix's ideas for promotion are solidly based in what he knows about his own people.

Choice matters. Like many others in Cochabamba, money was not the primary barrier for Felix. He had some savings that he planned to use for another purpose, but when he learned about a new product that would make his life easier and more comfortable, that moved a toilet up his priority list. For

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those who do have financial constraints, banks in the area are beginning to offer loans for toilets, a novelty in this Andean country.

Communities grow; some very quickly – like Felix’s neighbourhood at nearly 10 per cent per year. Giving everybody a toilet today does nothing for the thousands of people who are going to move there next year, nor even those with a toilet, since if your neighbour is still pooping in his yard, chances are you’re still going to be smelling it, your kid might be playing in it, and it most likely will still make its way into some of what you eat or drink.

How do you promote a system where everybody can choose their sanitation solution forever?

Our role as an NGO is shifting from one of direct toilet subsidy and construction to one in which we are investing in supporting these individuals and their creative, entrepreneurial solutions to the lack of toilets they see all around them. Specifically with Felix and his Microempresa SiSe we directed our support towards: 1) a market analysis for sanitation goods and services in peri-urban Cochabamba; 2) product development and testing; 3) promotional support; and 4) invitation to networking events where they have already found new clients. A business plan is

under way, but Felix was the first one to invest his own time and money in expanding his business and negotiating prices with suppliers.

This shift – from toilet construction projects to promoting sustainable sanitation services – is one that aims for a situation in which everybody can access the toilet they want, not the toilet that somebody else thinks they should have. Thousands of toilets in the Bolivian Andes are never used once they have been built because of reasons that have nothing to do with engineering. Well-meaning private groups and large development agencies build toilets that cost more than people’s homes and then are surprised when people want to use the nicest structure on their homes as ‘banks’ for their currency: potatoes, corn or chickens. To tackle this challenge, we are exploring whether entrepreneurs and small businesses can offer a better alternative by understanding what people want, designing for what people want and can afford, and offering ongoing services and/or upgrades over time. Supporting sanitation businesses, and the people behind those businesses, like Felix, moves us one step closer to closing the gap of the toilet have and have-nots. Really closing it – forever.

Business as usual is not helping to get more people on the pot

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